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SUBJECT: UZBEKS AIM TO DEMONSTRATE TANGIBLE PROGRESS ON
HUMAN RIGHTS

REF: TASHKENT 2018

Classified By: Poloff Tim Buckley for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary: Ambassador met with Deputy Foreign Minister Nematov on December 21 to review the status of foreign operations legislation in Congress that includes language on Uzbekistan. Nematov appreciated the update and noted that Uzbek Ambassador Kamilov has kept MFA well-informed about policy developments in Washington. The GOU believes the legislation could have been much worse from its perspective and understands that there is a six-month period before potential visa restrictions enter into force. The Ambassador emphasized that it will be important to demonstrate progress on human rights in this timeframe, and specific opportunities include establishing a substantive prison visit program with ICRC, a public decree against torture by President Karimov, releasing religious and/or political prisoners in the GOU's traditional amnesty, and facilitating activities of local or international NGOs in Uzbekistan. Nematov said the GOU "is prepared to continue cooperation on a permanent basis." The GOU's calm reaction to the legislation -- which by no means lets it off the hook -- confirms that a foundation exists for an intensified bilateral dialogue on human rights that needs to bear results. The hard part comes now in trying to get there. End summary.

GOU Well-Informed

12. (C) The Ambassador met on December 21 with Nematov to discuss the latest developments in the foreign operations legislation in Washington, which in the version sent to the President includes visa restrictions on GOU officials who were involved in Andijon but provides for a waiver at the discretion of the Secretary of State. The Ambassador noted that, significantly, the legislation does not include financial sanctions and provides for a six-month window before visa restrictions enter into force. Nematov listened patiently before noting that Uzbek Ambassador Kamilov had already informed MFA about these developments, including analysis that the final language had been scaled back. (Note: Nematov was in a good mood at this meeting and at a reception the evening of December 20, in contrast to our meeting one month ago when he learned about the possible sanctions and visa bans. End note.)

Menu of Actions

13. (C) The Ambassador stressed that the GOU faces a major opportunity -- and also pressure -- to demonstrate tangible progress on human rights during the next six months before a visa ban enters into force. The menu of possible actions which would send a positive message to the international community includes: establishing a substantive prison visit program with the ICRC (including accepting its demand to take its recommendations seriously); following up on President Karimov's expressed willingness during his November 20 meeting with the Ambassador (reftel) to issue a decree stipulating zero-tolerance for torture among GOU officials; releasing political and/or religious prisoners in the GOU's traditional annual amnesty; and improving support for local NGOs as well as inviting international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch to resume operations in Uzbekistan. The Ambassador also mentioned that this would in turn facilitate more extensive cooperation in other spheres, such as military-to-military relations.

"We Are Ready"

14. (C) Nematov's reaction was very calm, and he stated that the GOU "is prepared to continue cooperation on a permanent basis." He continued "we are ready" to conduct negotiations on these issues, specifically citing the GOU's repeated invitations dating to May 4 to the ICRC to resume prison visits immediately. (Note: This is true; however ICRC wants a more thorough commitment from the GOU to follow up on its previous recommendations. Reftel. End note.) Nematov

asserted that the ball is in ICRC's court and that "they are absolutely unobjective" and "follow a political standard." Nematov also pointed to Uzbekistan's recent abolition of the death penalty as an example of its commitment to human rights.

Comment

15. (C) President Karimov had informed the Ambassador on November 20 that sanctions of any sort would lead to a crisis in U.S. - Uzbek relations. Nematov's calm reaction suggests that the GOU is keenly aware that the final language in the legislation is not as harsh as it initially feared. It perhaps also understands the need to deliver tangible progress as soon as possible in order to make the case that the visa ban should be cancelled altogether. Its proactive efforts to restart ICRC prison visits, regardless of how much it is willing to compromise on the substance, are at least an indication it recognizes a sense of urgency. The GOU also senses an opportunity to build on the recently re-established foundation of positive steps to cement better ties with the West as an antidote to growing Russian influence. With President Karimov's election on December 23, as expected (septel), the stage is now set for intensified bilateral efforts to achieve progress on human rights. However, we are under no illusion this will be easy, and we will be consulting with the Department and the human rights community to devise the most effective strategy.

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